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ABSTRACT

Mini-lessons (brief, informative explanations that demonstrate what readers do) are a key instructional practice in meaning centered reading programs. The content of the mini-lessons is determined by the needs of learners. In procedural mini-lessons, teachers explain the steps for successfully completing a task or performing a reading-related behavior. In literary mini-lessons, teachers demonstrate how to compose meaning by focusing on literary content. Teachers can use mini-lessons about strategies and skills to make invisible meaning-making processes visible to readers. Attitude mini-lessons capitalize on and predispose children toward the intrinsic rewards of reading. What makes mini-lessons a unique instructional practice is the combination and interpretation of some basic features of instruction: relevance, time, materials, nature of the teacher talk, and student application of what is learned. Recommendations for developing mini-lessons include: (1) select topics that emerge from students' reading needs; (2) choose a few familiar books to illustrate key points; (3) use a timer to limit the lessons to 7 minutes; and (4) include mini-lessons as a routine part of reading instruction. (Contains four sample mini-lessons.) (RS)

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READING MINI-LESSONS: AN INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE FOR MEANING CENTERED READING PROGRAMS

by

Shelby Barrentine
with
Heidi Quistgard, Kristi Ullyott, and Valerie Wierson

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READING MINI-LESSONS: AN INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE FOR MEANING CENTERED READING PROGRAMS

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One teaching skill that is increasingly recognized as necessary for helping children grow as readers is the ability to explain what good readers do when they are reading. Oral explanation about what good readers do is helpful because reading is largely an invisible process. Simply by watching a good reader, children cannot come to know how that reader composes meaning, deciphers a word, or chooses an interesting book. Novices can come to know what good readers do, however, from brief, informative explanations that demonstrate what accomplished readers do. These explanations, often called mini-lessons, have been an accepted instructional practice used to teach children about facets of writing (Calkins, 1986; Atwell, 1987). Only more recently have mini-lessons gained popularity as an instructional practice to teach children about reading.

I work with preservice elementary teachers in the area of reading methods. Nearly all of these students tell me that when they were youngsters they learned to read through traditional basal reading programs. In these programs, reading was not taught as a meaning-making enterprise. For many of my students, learning to read involved pronouncing words correctly and learning to identify the author's meaning. Typically, my students did not experience demonstrations that illuminated how to go about becoming strategic, independent, meaning-makers. The notion that, as classroom teachers, they will need to possess the ability to orally explain and demonstrate how good readers compose meaning, is usually completely new to them because the idea is so far removed from their own experiences with learning to read.

At the beginning of the reading methods course my students and I build the understanding that readers construct meaning by blending personal meanings with peers' interpretations and with the author's meanings. As they grasp the importance of this idea, the preservice teachers become concerned and curious about how to teach children to grow as readers who can independently construct meaning. We explore many holistic instructional practices that aim to achieve this end: reading predictable books; teaching graphophonic cues through shared reading and writing; providing extended time to read real books (in all grades); responding to literature through book talks; understanding literature through discussion groups; creating oral and written retellings; writing responses to open-ended questions in literature logs; drawing; dramatizations; and charting and creating class books. Additionally, we focus on implementing reading mini-lessons as a key instructional practice.

Patricia Hagerty (1992), author of *Readers' Workshop: Real Reading*, recommends establishing mini-lessons as a daily ritual during periods of reading instruction. These oral demonstrations serve as models for the private speech novice readers require to complete reading tasks when working alone (Berk, 1994). Learners require oral guidance

from adults before they successfully complete complex tasks such as learning to make sense of text or decode new words. The information gained from mini-lessons can be used by readers to complete and even to self-regulate reading tasks. This view of learning to read is compatible with Vygotsky's theory that speech and learning are very strongly linked (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Vygotsky, 1986). According to this theory of learning, the range of tasks that a child is ready to master must be supported with different types of guidance from an adult. In the case of reading tasks, verbal guidance is essential since most reading tasks are "invisible." In other words, readers cannot simply watch an expert reader and learn what to do. The verbal information that is presented in mini-lessons serves to demonstrate to the child what inner dialogues he or she can adopt during independent efforts to complete reading tasks.

Interestingly, some of my reading methods students initially resist the idea of using reading mini-lessons. They are extremely sensitive to the problem of classrooms being dominated with teacher-talk. Thus, for them, being encouraged to use talk to teach about reading, literature, and meaning construction is counterintuitive and they hesitate to embrace the practice. As we explore the range of topics for mini-lessons and consider that brief demonstrations using teacher talk can be efficient, interesting, and based on the needs of readers, their resistance breaks down. It is replaced by enthusiastic support for and commitment to this teaching practice.

In the article I present sample mini-lessons that reading methods students wrote in collaboration with me to illustrate what mini-lessons are like in meaning centered reading instruction. Next, I explain more about the underpinnings of reading mini-lessons. Finally, I provide some guidelines for developing one's own mini-lessons.

Mini-Lesson Topics and Sample Lessons

It is important to understand that the content of mini-lessons is determined by the needs of learners. Teachers observe students' developmental needs in reading, and these needs become the topic of mini-lessons. It is useful, however, to have some topics in mind when beginning to implement this instructional practice. Hagerty (1992) identifies three categories of reading mini-lessons: procedural, literary, and strategies/skills. I will suggest a range of topics in these categories and provide sample lessons. I will also address an additional category: attitude mini-lessons.

Procedural mini-lessons. In procedural lessons, teachers explain the steps for successfully completing a task or performing a reading-related behavior. Procedural lessons include topics such as:

- How to record information about your book on your reading record
- How to return your book to the library
- How to check out books
- How to prepare for a book talk
- What behaviors to demonstrate when someone is sharing a book or giving a book talk
- How to tell about what you have read
- How to ask a reader questions during a book talk
- How to choose a book from the library
- How to decide if a book is just right for your reading level

Teaching primary level children procedures for telling someone about what they have read was addressed in a mini-lesson by Heidi Quistgard and me. We believe it is important for children to learn to tell about what they have read in an organized manner. We accept the idea that some children require the direction and support provided in this sample

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lesson. In the following mini-lesson we describe the purpose of the lesson. Then we explain and demonstrate steps for telling about a book, and finally we link the application of the procedures to students' reading routine. Our lesson on these procedures would be something like this:

Yesterday I was noticing that some people do a very good job of telling other people about what they are reading. Telling someone about what you are reading is an important step in the reading process. Telling about your story lets other people know what the story means to you. It also lets you, yourself, know what you understand and do not understand in a story. I mention this because I can think of some steps that we can use if we need help telling about our story. I'll share the steps with you now. Here is a chart with one set of ideas that will help you be prepared:

A. *Show and tell the title, author, and illustrator of the book.*
B. *Tell what the story is about.*
C. *Tell who your favorite character is and why.*
D. *Tell what your favorite part of the story is and why.*
E. *Tell something you learned from the story.*

To show you what I mean, I will tell you about a story that I read. I will use the ideas on the chart to help me.

Here is my book. It is called Dicey's Song *(1982) and was written by Cynthia Voigt. There are no illustrations. The story is about a teenaged girl named Dicey and about how she strives to keep her brothers and sisters strong and together since their parents can't take care of them. The children all live with their grandmother, but it isn't easy for anyone. My favorite character is Dicey. She, along with her grandmother, holds her family together. She is a very strong person. She takes care of a lot of things within the family even though she is only 13 years old. My favorite part was when Dicey and her grandmother took off in a plane for the first time. I like this part because it reminded me of the excitement I felt the first time I took off in a plane. Something I learned from the book was that it is strong people that hold a family together. Dicey held her family together through thick and thin. Even though the family had very little money, they stuck together. Life can be fun, even if you don't have a lot of money but have strength and love of each other.*

Now, did you notice that I first told the title and author? Next I told you a little bit about the story. Then I told you two favorite things: my favorite character and my favorite part of the book. Finally, I told you something I learned. Do you have any questions about how to use these ideas to talk about your book? (Leave time for questions.)

Right now it is time for extended reading. I am going to come around and invite three people to talk about the book they are reading when we have sharing time. Those people can try out using these ideas and we can help them. Okay, get out your books and move to your reading space.

Literary mini-lessons. In literary mini-lessons teachers demonstrate how to compose meaning by focusing on literary content. Lesson topics in this category range from learning about the types of genre in children's literature to recognizing when an author uses foreshadowing. Possible lesson topics include:

- Characteristics of formula fiction (such as romance or horror)
- Characteristics of biography
- Evaluating characters' behaviors
- Types of conflict in stories (e.g., person against person or person against nature)

- Patterns of action (conflict and resolution)
- Recognizing implicit themes (what is the story *really* about)
- How setting is integral with conflict and resolution in survival novels
- Identifying point of view (i.e., who is telling the story)
- Recognizing figurative language
- How humor is woven into the story
- Titles and what they mean
- How illustrations add meaning to the story
- How an author "grabs" our attention

To develop a feel for literary information mini-lessons, Kristi Ullyott and I wrote a lesson aimed at teaching primary level readers to recognize the setting of a story. In our lesson, we establish what setting means and why it is important in some books. We review a few familiar picture books to build the concept of setting. Then we demonstrate to the readers how to notice setting in a story. We encourage them to increase their awareness of setting for the purpose of building more personal meaning with a story. We expect that a mini-lesson on setting might go like this:

Children, when an author writes a story he or she has to make a lot of decisions about the book. We know the author must decide what the story will be about and who will be in it. Today I want to tell you about something we have overlooked in many of our good stories. The author must decide on where and when a story will take place. You might already know that this is called the setting. It is interesting to notice the setting, because sometimes the setting brings us to a time or a place where we have never been before. Sometimes though, the setting brings us to places just like where we spend a lot of time. Today I am going to show you some books, and we will notice where the story takes place.

Let's look at this book, Barn Dance! *by Bill Martin, Jr. and John Archambault (1986). Do you remember that in the story a little boy and some animals have a dance? We can tell from the title of the book where the dance takes place. Of course–in the barn. Raise your hand if you have been in a barn before. If you read this book, you can use the setting of this story to remember what it was like being in that barn. If you have never been in a barn late on a summer evening, the setting of this story can help you imagine what that would be like. Remember when we read this book by Eve Bunting called* Fly Away Home? *(1991). It was set in a big airport near a big city. That setting made us sad because that is where the boy and his father lived–they were homeless. We kept hoping that the setting would change in that book, didn't we? We wanted them to have an apartment.*

One way to notice the setting more is to notice when it changes in a story. Let's look at this book that we know very well, Where the Wild Things Are *by Maurice Sendak (1963). Let's look at the pictures and see if we can notice the setting by finding the places where it changes. That means we need to look for a place in the book where Max is in a different place. Look at this page. Max is at his house. Let's keep turning the pages and see if the setting changes. (Turn pages until Max is in his bedroom.) Now look. Max is still in his house, but now he is in his bedroom. (Turn pages until Max is in his make-believe world.) What is interesting about this setting, children, is that it changed, but it is a make-believe place. When Max was sent to his room, he pretended or dreamed that he was somewhere else. I don't think he pretended or dreamed for hours and hours though, because remember what the story says? Yes–his dinner was still hot.*

When you are reading your book today, try to notice when the setting changes.

Whenever it changes, pause a little bit, and try to think if you have ever been in a place like in your book. Put a bookmark in those places. When we meet together for sharing, some of you can tell about those settings with the group. In the meantime, I'll be coming around and talking with you about the setting of your book.

Strategies/skills mini-lessons. Teachers use mini-lessons about strategies and skills to make *invisible* meaning-making processes *visible* to readers. Unless teachers take direct measures toward teaching about strategic reading, what competent readers do to construct meaning remains a mystery to novice or developing readers. Through clear explanations, developing readers can learn about and then consciously use the meaning-making techniques that expert readers have internalized and use automatically.

Both strategy and skills lessons are valuable to readers. Strategy lessons focus on broader-based meaning-making techniques than skills lessons (Hagerty, 1992). For example, a skills lesson might focus narrowly on the concept of using sound blending to decode words. A strategy lesson might focus broadly on the range of clues available for use when decoding a word you don't know (e.g., letters and sounds, picture clues, what word makes sense). The range of topics in this category of lessons is very broad–from organizing information for better recall to using "whisper" reading to improve one's powers of concentration. Some possible strategies/skills topics include:

- Making and confirming predictions
- Using your background knowledge to add meaning to the story
- Making good guesses at words you don't recognize
- Adapting your reading to different text patterns
- Recognizing what is important in the text
- Learning to self-question while reading
- Carrying on a conversation inside your head as you read
- Noticing when meaning breaks down
- Making up questions to keep building comprehension
- Improving concentration when reading
- Reading on when meaning breaks down
- Rereading when meaning breaks down
- Drawing diagrams to enhance or clarify meaning
- Mapping (webbing) to compose or build comprehension
- Retelling a story
- Connecting stories or characters to your own life experiences

In a mini-lesson prepared by Valerie Wierson and me, we address the notion of adjusting reading speed to the cognitive demands of the task. We expect that the following mini-lesson about using whisper reading would teach intermediate level readers to reduce their reading speed and result in deeper concentration and greater comprehension.

In reading class today I want to stress the importance of concentrating more deeply while you are reading. I have noticed that some of the books you are reading for your reports have lots of new information in them and that makes them harder to read. When a book is harder to read, it is harder to concentrate on what it is about. I want to share a strategy with you today that will help you concentrate and will likely result in your being able to recall more information from your book. The strategy is called whisper reading. By whisper reading I mean that when you come to an especially complicated part of your book, you actually read that part aloud but very softly to yourself. Whisper reading will cause you to slow down and read more slowly. You can think more

when you read it slowly–you will concentrate on the ideas in the book.

For her report about the home of the President and his family, the White House, Sophia is reading this book called How the White House Really Works *(Sullivan, 1989). I noticed that the section in her book about White House security has a lot of facts, numbers, and new terms. Rather than read this part silently, Sophia might want to whisper read several of the more fact-heavy passages. Whisper reading will cause her to slow down, think more about what she is reading. In general, she will concentrate more.*

Well, it is time to get reading. I want you to experiment with the whisper reading strategy. During sharing time, I will ask a few of you to tell about whether or not it helped you concentrate more on your reading.

Attitude mini-lessons. Attitude mini-lessons capitalize on and predispose children toward the intrinsic rewards of reading. In attitude mini-lessons, teachers teach about the outlook students need to develop and demonstrate at various times as readers. For example, some children need to learn about the value of reading. Possible lesson topics include:

- Choosing to read
- Making time to read
- Turning off the television and making time to read
- Being persistent at comprehending when a text is difficult (e.g., a book with difficult science concepts)
- Telling others about great reading experiences you've had
- Why reading is rewarding and pleasurable
- Why it is important to read in a democracy
- How reading helps people in their jobs
- It takes practice to learn to be a good reader

I like to deliver some version of the following mini-lesson to students at various levels of schooling. The topic of the lesson is "persistence as a reader." The lesson either reminds students or introduces them to the notion that persistence is a useful attribute when reading challenging material. In the following version, I am addressing my reading methods undergraduates.

Some people don't know that it is "okay" to struggle with words and ideas when they are reading. I want to let you know that it is not only "okay" to struggle with words and ideas, but that it is important to do so. The books that you will read for this class are probably the first books you have ever read about reading instruction. You should expect to struggle to understand conceptual words like semantics, syntactic, graphophonemic, and pragmatic. You should expect to have to reread and study when you come across ideas like "process reading" and "strategic reading" and "holistic assessment." Don't be discouraged if you read the text and find that you didn't grasp every concept the first time through it. Be persistent about building meaning. Reread. Write ideas in the margins. Take notes. Write out questions. Identify vocabulary that you think is important but don't quite grasp. Push yourself to learn from what you are reading. If you automatically grasped all the information in the book, I wouldn't expect you to take the course. What I do expect from you is to be persistent readers. Be persistent about constructing meaning. Then, in class, we will work on those meanings when we discuss our understandings.

Before our next class meeting, what I'd like you to do is notice your level of persistence when reading the assignment for this class. How persistent are you about understanding something that you recognize as important? Mark some places in your text where you were and were not persistent in

understanding a new concept. When you come to class we will devote some time talking in small groups about persistence.

Underpinnings of Successful Mini-Lessons

What makes mini-lessons a unique instructional practice is the combination and interpretation of some basic features of instruction: relevance, time, materials, nature of the teacher talk, and student application of what is learned. In the following section I elaborate on this nomenclature for the purpose of explaining how each feature is at work in effective mini-lessons.

Relevance. The point of providing mini-lessons is to promote the reader's ability to become a better reader (Hagerty, 1992). The mini-lesson topics that are most likely to promote reading ability are those that are derived from the needs of learners. Observant teachers are continually alert to manifestations of readers' abilities and inabilities to decode, compose meaning, and follow through on tasks. These observations become the topics of mini-lessons. When the content of mini-lessons is derived from the needs of learners, the lessons are highly relevant.

Time. Calkins (1986) describes her mini-lessons about writing as "three minute lectures." Hagerty (1992) recommends that reading mini-lessons last no longer than 10 minutes. The length of the mini-lesson is important to consider for a number of reasons. Mini-lessons that last longer than the recommended amount of time cut into children's time for extended reading. One of the most important aspects of any reading program is allowing time for extended reading (Routman, 1991), and mini-lessons should not undermine this programmatic principle. Another problem caused by long mini-lessons is that they tend to address more information than can be processed effectively during one listening event. Effective mini-lessons are limited to explaining one thing. If they contain too many concepts, procedures, skills, or strategies they can become complicated, confusing, or boring.

Another consideration about mini-lessons and time is that the lessons need to be a routine part of the reading program. Including mini-lessons in the reading routine ensures scheduled time will be devoted to directly meeting children's reading needs. Unless the lessons become an established part of the reading program schedule, as an instructional practice they will be marginalized and irregular. Children will not learn to rely on mini-lessons as sources of knowledge about how to become a better reader.

Materials. Books that have been and will be enjoyed, studied, and composed in the community of readers are the best source of text material for teaching students how to grow as readers (Hagerty, 1992). These texts–children's literature and student made books–become the material base for demonstrating a procedure, strategy, or attitude. Students are intrinsically motivated to actively listen to mini-lessons when they are grounded in rich language, interesting characters and plots, delightful illustrations, challenging content, and their own writing. At times it is useful to support student learning with visual aids during a mini-lesson. Charts that list steps or key information, transparencies of the segment of literature being read in the demonstration, a variety of books, or a sample of the teacher's work may help clarify concepts or strategies or help students be more independent when attempting to apply information gained from the lesson.

Nature of the talk. Contrary to some teachers' expectations, mini-lessons are not primarily opportunities for discussion or skill

practice. Student interaction, if included at all, is kept to a minimum (Calkins, 1986). The mini-lesson is a time for teachers to demonstrate relevant reading strategies, convey knowledge about literature, and explain procedures (Atwell, 1987; Hagerty, 1992). Warning against using a recitation format during mini-lessons, Calkins argues that question-answer type mini-lessons are often confusing and hard to follow. Similarly, Hagerty recommends learner interaction be included in mini-lessons only when discussion is natural and feasible within the allotted three to 10 minute time period. Verbal interaction should not be prohibited in mini-lessons, but cumbersome question and answer sessions should be avoided. Moreover, mini-lessons should not be confused with sessions in which readers respond to literature through discussion. Mini-lessons are a way to "add information to the class pot" (Calkins, 1986, p. 170) rather than opportunities to discuss and respond.

During the presentation of a mini-lesson it is important that teachers rely on basic features of effective explanations. Hagerty (1992) recommends that three features of explanation be implemented:

- Clearly *describe* the purpose of the lesson,
- *Demonstrate* the procedure or reading strategy, and
- *Link* the information to student's work.

Describing the purpose of the lesson, in terms that students are familiar with, enables students to focus on the lesson itself. Communicating this information clearly helps students to organize their thinking and prepares them to listen.

Demonstration of the procedure, strategy, or literary concept allows students to grasp the information for later application. Demonstration should attempt to create an "aha!" situation for learners: "Oh! So that is how that is done! I see!" The demonstration should make the task "do-able" for learners and even inspire them to try to apply the information during their independent tasks. If feasible, student involvement can be included in the lesson. Teachers, however, should first demonstrate the content of the lesson. Students should not be expected to demonstrate a behavior that has not yet been demonstrated to them.

Directly *linking* the information to the learner's upcoming "regular work" aims to cause readers to commit to using what was learned from the mini-lesson. The regular work of students during the reading period is reading books. It is during extended reading that students have the opportunity to apply and practice using what was learned from the mini-lesson.

Applying what was learned. It is important to keep in mind that mini-lessons are not definitive explanations but are presentations of the salient points (Atwell, 1987) of a class procedure, reading strategy, literary concept, or reading attitude. The mini-lesson topic can be revisited many times throughout the year; the teacher does not use any single mini-lesson to "cover" a topic. Readers have opportunities to apply strategies and procedures during extended reading periods and during periods of response to literature. When teachers confer with readers, the children receive feedback and guidance on effective use of the information gained from mini-lessons.

Even though the lesson is presented to the entire class, some students will not yet be ready for the content in the mini-lesson and will not immediately use the information. For others, the content of the lesson will be a worthwhile review of information. For those for whom the lesson was developed the information will be immediately useful, although it will likely take them some time to masterfully

use the strategies or information. Again, a mini-lesson topic can be revisited many times throughout the year. As readers demonstrate the need for a lesson topic to be revisited, the teacher can use whole group, small group, and one-on-one teaching situations to promote readers' increased competence with applying the information and strategies.

Preparing Your Own Mini-Lessons

Like many good teaching practices, mini-lessons are more challenging to prepare than they first appear. Often there are unseen aspects that make the practice successful. Those interested in developing mini-lessons for reading instruction should consider the following recommendations:

1. Select a topic that emerges from your students' reading needs. Write down what you notice readers need to increase their reading ability. As a result of writing down what you notice, you will develop your own list of mini-lesson topics and end up meeting the needs of your individual learners. Be sure the topics are ones that will really help someone become a better reader–a better meaning-maker. Avoid topics that repeatedly focus on sounding out words or structural features of words. Rather, emphasize topics that help readers compose and extend meaning.

2. Think of the key information related to the topic which students will benefit from knowing. List those key points in your lesson plans so that you are sure to share them.

3. Choose a few familiar books that can be used to illustrate your key points. Resist using too many books or ones that are unfamiliar to the learners. If you use too many books, you may overwhelm your students. The information conveyed in the lesson will be more contextualized if the books are familiar.

4. Think in advance about how you will tie the lesson to students' reading routines. Will you simply tell students that you will confer with a few of them about applying the strategy? Often this is the most useful follow-up to a mini-lesson. Other times, in response to a mini-lesson, you may have students write, draw, or orally share with the entire class.

5. When I first started delivering mini-lessons, I always set my timer for seven minutes. Setting the timer prevented me from turning mini-lessons into long-winded explanations that cut into extended reading or student activity time. Consider setting a timer to discipline yourself to present meaningful and brief explanations/demonstrations.

6. Include mini-lessons as a routine part of your reading instruction. On a daily basis, provide students with information that they can rely on and apply to their own reading.

7. Notice when readers are applying the information shared in a mini-lesson. Tell the student you observed their success. Write down this information in your anecdotal records for reference when writing progress statements.

8. Trust yourself. You, as the teacher, have a knowledge base and are an authority on reading, teaching, and your students. Trust yourself to use that knowledge base to deliver pertinent and interesting mini-lessons.

Conclusion

Mini-lessons are aimed at helping students grow as readers. By nature, these

lessons promote growth in readers because the lessons are relevant, informative, and brief; use interesting literature; and provide an opportunity to apply what was learned. Students gain more knowledge about reading procedures, literature, skills and strategies, and attitudes. Teachers can explain and demonstrate the essential knowledge that readers require. The goal is to have students internalize this knowledge and grow toward independence and proficiency in composing meaning.

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